CHICAGO TRIBUNE
18 May 1986

ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 8, Section 1

Perspective

Afghanistan: No End in Sight

Resistance hits resolve in nightmare war likely to get more frightening

By Raymond Coffey

PESHAWAR, Pakistan—Fourteen killed and a score wounded the other day, just up the road from here in an artillery barrage on an Afghan refugee center.

Nine dead a few days before in a jet bomber raid on the same sort of target.

And all that on this side—the Pakistani side—of the border with Afghanistan.

The Afghan war, in which at least half a million people have been killed, and in which the major military force is a 120,000-man Soviet army of occupation, now is deep into its seventh year.

And the end is not in sight.

The accepted wisdom, in fact, in this baked and dusty border town in Northwest Frontier province, which has become the de facto headquarters for the Afghan nationalist anti-communist resistance, is that the war is likely to turn even meaner and bloodier.

That is the view expressed generally by leaders of the Afghan resistance, by Western diplomats and by a variety of other experienced observers of the long-running war.

All those involved on this side of the border, and all those interviewed here and in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, tend, of course, to be in sympathy with the resistance, which also has the strong support of the U.S. government.

There also is wide agreement on three other points:

- The new Soviet-selected leader of the protege communist regime in Afghanistan is bad news for the resistance and for U.S. interests.
- Neighboring Pakistan, a principal foreign supporter and burden-bearer of the anti-communist resistance's war effort, may be wearying of its role and looking for a way out.
- Both sides in the war are taking heavy casualties, neither can really be said to be winning, and neither is prepared to call it quits.

Leaders of the Afghan resistance, called the Mujahedin, are especially jittery right now that both Pakistan and the U.S. might strike a deal with the Soviets and abandon their cause.

But even if the Soviets did decide to cut their losses and go home, it also is widely agreed that the war would go on intramurally among the Afghans themselves.

"We started our resistance against the communist regime in Kabul," said Fazel Akbar, a prominent and scholarly figure in resistance circles. "The Russians weren't even there then. The resistance will not end when they leave."

Though casualties have been staggering on both sides, and though the long conflict has generated more than 4 million refugees, the war often has all but faded from American consciousness because it has dragged on now since Christmas, 1979.

Two recent events have again focused attention on the war:

First, the Soviets dumped Babrak Karmal as leader of the Afghan regime in Kabul and replaced him as Communist Party chief with a former head of the secret police who uses only one name, Najibullah, or just Najib.

Second, a United Nations mediator has convened a seventh round of so-called "proximity talks" in Geneva involving Pakistan and the Afghan regime in pursuit of a "political solution" to the war.

Neither event has produced any great excitement or optimism among those who live with and deal with the war and back the Mujahedin—or "freedom fighters," as President Reagan calls them.

"Najibullah is very good for the Russians and very bad for us," said Akbar, who was on duty at Kabul Radio the night the Soviets invaded and shot up the place and who is now associated with the respected Afghan Information and Documentation Center here.

All the Soviets did in ousting Karmal and anointing Najibullah is "substitute a young and effective s.o.b. for an old and ineffective s.o.b.," said a well-placed Western diplomat.

Karmal, 57, allegedly asked to be replaced because he is ailing. Western diplomats, however, say the change was less a matter of Karmal being sick than of the Soviets being sick of him.

"They gave him more than five years to do the work [create a native political-economic apparatus that could survive the departure of the Soviet army] and he didn't get the job done; it's that simple," one diplomat said.

Najibullah is only 39 and by reputation, among his foes at least, represents a considerably greater problem for the Afghan resistance. He is not only more ruthless and more efficient than Karmal, but he has potential political appeal among the Afghan people.

He is a Pushtun, for one thing, a member of the largest ethnic group, and, according to Akbar, who knew him long ago as a medical student, he has "close relations with the tribal people" in what is a tribal society.

"He is a tough Pushtun, a trained killer-type from the secret police," said a diplomat, "and he may bring a possibility of change but probably change in the wrong direction."

Referring to runaway rumors at the November U.S.-Soviet summit in Geneva that Moscow intended to signal some new willingness for a political solution in Afghanistan, this diplomat added, "If they wanted to send a positive signal, this [Najibullah] doesn't do it."

Fundamentally, though, no one who is part of the resistance or can claim any measure of expertise on the war appears to feel that Najibullah ultimately will have any more success in crushing the resistance than Karmal did.

Unpalatable as they find Najibullah's promotion by the Soviets, however, the Afghan

Continued

resistance leaders are more distressed over the latest round of "proximity talks," so called because Pakistan and the Afghan regime refuse to meet face-to-face and the UN mediator shuffles back and forth between them.

That gives some idea of how successful the talks have been so far. But the Afghan resistance leaders are frankly worried that this time the Pakistanis might cut a deal for a "political solution"—and that, moreover, the U.S. might go along with it.

Pakistani President Mohammad Zia-ul Haq, always a tough customer and an old army man, has stood fast so far against the Soviet occupiers and their Afghan proteges. He has insisted that the Soviets withdraw from Afghanistan on a short timetable and all at once—not in a long and phased pullout.

Zia has his own reasons. With old foe India on one border, he is less than enthusiastic about having a Soviet client on the other. And he currently has a lapful of political problems at home, the principal one being the presence of about 3 million Afghan refugees along the border here.

The refugees are a major economic and political burden and Pakistan wants them to go home.

Akbar said the Afghan resistance is worried that if a political solution is arrived at in Geneva, "our help will stop" from both Pakistan and the U.S.

"We hear the U.S. is ready to give guarantees," he said, referring to a U.S. announcement in December that it would be willing to serve as a guarantor of a peace settlement that included both a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and an end to American aid to the resistance.

"Which kind of guarantees, to which government?" Akbar asked, reflecting a fear that an agreement would grant status and permanence to the communist regime in Kabul.

The concern about what Western diplomats refer to as a possible Pakistani "sellout" of the resistance in return for getting rid of the refugees is not counted entirely unlikely by experienced observers.

Nor surprising, given the fervent and frequently repeated support President Reagan has voiced for the Afghan "freedom fighters," do informed diplomats count out the possibility of the U.S. agreeing to a settlement that left the communist regime in power in Kabul and cut the ground out from under the resistance.

"Afghanistan was not even on the [U.S.] radar screen until 1979 [when the Russians invaded]," said one Western diplomat. "If the Soviets leave and Afghanistan becomes a black hole, [the U.S.] couldn't care less."

America's "strategic interests are not involved" in Afghanistan, he said, except for the Soviets being there.

There is, in any case, no indication of a precipitate Soviet withdrawal, and a more immediate problem for the Afghan resistance—and a concern for the U.S.—is the continuing and glaring disunity among the resistance groups themselves.

There are seven major groups [and a flock of lesser ones] who are divide roughly into "fundamentalist" and "moderate" subdivisions, and relations among them are marked by suspicion, feuding and bitterly competing political objectives.

The "fundamentalist" groups are determined in varying degree to establish a strictly Moslem regime in Kabul. The rhetoric from some of them is distinctly anti-U.S. and has an almost Iranian ring to it. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of one major group, takes the public position that "both America and Russia are enemies of Islam."

Iran, in fact, finances one of the minor resistance groups, and one of the big seven, led by Abdul Rasooll Sayyaf, is bankrolled by Saudi Arabia. Typical of the relations among the groups was a crack by one prominent resistance figure that Sayyaf is always "too busy counting his Saudi money" to contribute much to the fight.

The largest, and probably most westernized, of the "moderate" groups is Sayed Ahmad Gailani's National Islamic Front of Afghanistan.

They generally oppose establishing a religious state run on strict Islamic law and also generally favor bringing back the deposed King Mohammad Zahir Khan, now in exile in Europe, not as a ruler but as a national symbol in the British style.

Gailani, a gray-bearded, hawk-nosed man of powerful dignity, insisted in an interview that the seven major resistance groups have made great progress toward putting aside their differences and forming an effective coalition.

But, again typically, both he and his son, who serves as interpreter-spokesman, spent a large part of the interview making and remaking the point that their group is the "principal" and "largest" one and that Gailani is the "supreme commander" of the resistance.

The fact appears to be that, as a key Western diplomat put it, the seven major groups, singly or in combination, "have done very little to establish themselves" as a "credible [political] alternative" to the Najibullah regime in Kabul.

The real basis for their opposition to a political solution based on a Soviet withdrawal, he said, is that such an arrangement would "not give any of them an engraved invitation" to move in and take over in Kabul.

"The lack of real unity is one of our big difficulties," agreed Akbar. "What we want is [political] self-determination. A religious [Moslem] dictatorship is no more acceptable than a communist dictatorship. . . . No one of them [the seven major resistance groups] is entirely acceptable."

Moreover, the shooting war inside Afghanistan appears not to be going especially well for either side.

The resistance suffered heavy losses in late April in a major Soviet offensive employing their most modern weaponry that was designed to set the stage for the new round of Geneva talks, Western diplomats acknowledge.

And lately, the Soviets have stepped up air and artillery strikes aimed mainly at Afghan refugee centers across the border in Pakistan. These attacks clearly are designed to "work on Pakistan's nerves," according to diplomatic sources.

The Afghan resistance also is murderously outgunned in what retired U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Ted Metaxis calls a Soviet "war of migratory genocide."

Though the figure of 500,000 Afghans killed has been acknowledged, some say a million have died. And in addition to the 4 million refugees who have fled the country, another 4 million Afghans have been uprooted and dislocated within the country.

Altogether, the dead, fled and dislocated come to half the pre-war population.

Resistance leaders claim to have killed more than 50,000 Soviets. The more conservative estimate, still a stiff price for the Soviets, is that at least 10,000 have died and many thousands more have been wounded.

Metaxis, who last week wound up a second three-month stint observing the war for the privately financed American Committee for a Free Afghanistan, said the resistance's most urgent military need is "effective anti-aircraft" weaponry.

The CIA [U.S. aid is still handled on an officially "covert" basis] recently delivered a few Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to the resistance but they remain at a great disadvantage against Soviet helicopter gunships.

The resistance also is in sore need of longer-range surface-to-surface rockets, according to Metaxis, to counter the current Soviet strategy of extending the security perimeter around their installations to a distance of about 10 miles.

Continued

3

That is beyond the range of the 107 mm. rockets basic to the resistance arsenal, and they need more 122 mm. rockets which have an effective range of about 12 miles, Metaxis said.

Metaxis, Western diplomats, other experienced observers of the war and the Afghans themselves all agree that the main thing the resistance has going for it is simple determination.

The Afghans pride themselves on their prowess as warriors and their bravery is, by all accounts, awesome. The enormous Soviet occupation force has not been able to crush them and, Metaxis said, "as long as they [the Afghan resistance] are willing to die, they'll keep it going."

What if Pakistani support and safe haven collapse and CIA arms deliveries are cut off?

"They say, 'We'll go back inside [Afghanistan], into the mountains and we'll slit their [Soviet] throats and take their guns,'" Metaxis said.

"I think the Afghans can take it longer than most people think they can," he said. "The Vietnamese did, remember?"

Akbar agreed that even if the Soviets withdrew tomorrow, it would be "impossible" for the resistance to abandon the war.

"If we had quit in the first year, there would have been no 1 million dead, no villages destroyed—no Russian invasion," he said. "Now the [Afghan] people would ask us why we had 1 million killed, why their villages were destroyed to leave the communists in power in Kabul.

"For us, what's the difference between Karmal and Najibullah? Our objective is self-determination for the Afghan people."

Raymond Coffey is an associate editor of The Tribune.